

## ICONS

Icons are a very special form of Christian art, found particularly in the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Greek word *eikon* means “image” or “to represent”, but icons are not just pictures created for the sake of art, they are ways of teaching about the Christian faith, they are literally “windows into heaven”. To Western eyes icons can appear unhelpful because of their overemphasized flatness, unreal colours, lack of perspective, and strange proportions – but the painter is not trying to depict *beauty*, they are depicting *holiness*, which demands a different artistic language.

Icons are made from animals, vegetables and minerals. The animal is egg yolk, which is mixed with the paints. The vegetable is the wood (or paper) on which the icon is painted. The minerals are the pigments used to make the paints. In this way the whole earth is involved in the making of an icon.

The artist must prepare himself before he begins his work with fasting and prayer and living the right kind of life. As he paints he continues to pray to God and to the saint the icon represents. The icon is made with prayer, for prayer. It is prayer.

Traditionally icons are painted on solid, well-aged wood, or thick board. First, because an icon is “holy space”, there needs to be something to separate the icon from the world of the viewer, so it has either a decorative border or a raised edge of wood. This “protects” the icon, like a jewel case protects a necklace. Many layers of gesso (white agent and glue) are then applied to the wood and sanded to give a smooth ivory like surface on which to paint – this is very time-consuming. The paint is egg tempera, which is the preferred medium for creating traditional icons because of the mediums greater luminosity and brilliance.... ideal for the unique characteristics of the icon. The yolk acts as a glue that suspends and holds together the pigments in water – the “binder”. The delicacy of the mixture of egg and water makes it possible to create very fine lines and superb detail. Finally the artist adds the gold leaf. Gold leaf comes in small little “books” that contain many very thin sheets of gold. Each piece of gold leaf is laid carefully on a dampened base of gilder’s clay, which will cement the gold to the surface. The gold then requires burnishing, which is time consuming but enhances the beauty of the final effect. Sometimes the whole of the background of an icon will be covered in gold leaf. Finally the icon is varnished to improve the adhesiveness and brilliance of the paint.

In icons Jesus and the saints are always shown with haloes which shows their holiness, but also the Christian belief in life after death, they should literally glow in the painting. In the formalised imagery Mary is usually painted wearing blue and surrounded by stars (“Queen of Heaven”). Jesus is usually shown blessing with his right hand and holding the Gospels in his left hand. If he is portrayed as a child held by Mary, he looks like a miniature adult (to show that even though he was a baby he was still God). God is usually shown only as a hand.

Icons are called “windows to the kingdom of heaven” because they represent the spiritual world and the Kingdom of God that is within us. Icons are one of the ways God is revealed to us. Through icons, the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world. In Orthodox Churches you will find an iconostasis, which is a wall of icons that separates the ordinary people from the priests in the inner sanctuary. The iconostasis plays an important role in the Liturgy. The priests recite prayers and cense the icons, especially those left and right of the royal doors through to the sanctuary. Believers will come forward to kiss icons, including those in the lower rows of the iconostasis, or light candles in front of them. They are not worshipping the icons, they are using them as a way of focussing their prayers. The icons bind this world to heaven. The icons are “speaking”.